

#188 ALEXANDER SHERMAN: USS *NEW ORLEANS*

Steven Haller (SH): Oh, my name is Steven Haller and we're speaking with Mr. Alexander A. Sherman on December 3, 1991 at ten AM. We're at the Sheraton Waikiki. This is tape number one.

Mr. Sherman was a Seaman First Class aboard the USS *NEW ORLEANS*, on December 7, 1941. At the time, his age was twenty-two and at present he's seventy-three. We're doing this tape for the National Park Service in cooperation with KHET TV. And we're really glad that you're here with us to talk about your experiences.

We were talking before about your career in the Navy and one thing I didn't ask you was to tell us how you got into the Navy in the first place.

Alexander Sherman (AS): I'll tell you.

SH: Tell me.

AS: When I went into the Navy, it was four of us who went down to get in. And in them days, the Navy was very hard to get into. You had to have a perfect bite, you had a twenty-twenty eye vision. And the three, the four of us went down, I'm the only one who passed the examination. I wanted to get into the Navy anyway, and that's what happened.

SH: This was at your hometown?

AS: They shipped me to Newport, Rhode Island, and that's where I did my boot training. And from there, they sent me to Long Beach, California. I caught the *UTAH*. The *UTAH* took me from Long Beach to Pearl Harbor, where I was signed to the USS *NEW ORLEANS*. And I was on her 'til, I guess, 1943.

SH: All right.

AS: All right.

SH: You said that you were aboard her until she sank at the Battle of Tassafaronga, that's correct?

AS: No, she didn't sink.

SH: She was . . . okay.

AS: She was, she got blowed . . . we lost our bow up to the . . .

SH: That's right.

AS: . . . number two turret, or number . . . the bridge, which we had the one with the aviation gas was in there, that's why it blew off. Just the impact and the gas blew it clean. If it didn't blow us clean, I believe we would have sunk.

SH: Backtrack just a second, when you signed up in the Navy, you were in your home-- at your hometown, which was Philadelphia?

AS: Philadelphia.

SH: Is that correct?

AS: Yeah.

SH: What were your usual duties on the *NEW ORLEANS*?

AS: My --- I was in the black gang, in other words, I was a machinist man, I was in the engine room. And, well, when you first go aboard any ship, you work in the bilges and you work your way up through different ranks 'til you don't have to do that type of work. And I eventually worked up to chief, but not on the *NEW ORLEANS*. I left the *NEW ORLEANS*, I was [Machinist's Mate] Second Class and went to four different diesel schools to learn diesel. And they changed my rank to motor machinist's mate.

And then I came out and I went aboard a sea-going tug, a new one, which I put in commission in Stockton, California. I don't remember the year, either '42 or '43, and we went to sea. We went to the South Pacific. And we had duty in the South Pacific and we were a new type tug, which had a recompression chamber, where we could take -- we had divers aboard -- where we could repair ships at sea. And we did a lot of jobs like that and we went into the Philippines where two of our cruisers were damaged and laying in the water, couldn't move. So we went and we towed 'em from Leyte Gulf out of that area, into a safer area, and while under way, we patched their engine room up and pumped out the engine room. And in that time, while we were working on them, we lost two divers down in the engine room because their lines got tangled with the explosion, the metal down there.

SH: This is on the cruisers that were being patched?

AS: That's the ones, we were working on the cruisers there.

SH: And what were the names of those cruisers?

AS: The *HOUSTON* and the *CANBERRA*.

SH: And what was the name of the tugboat you were on at that time?

AS: USS *CURRENT* [ARS] 22, number twenty-two.

SH: Okay, good. Let's go back to Pearl Harbor. What were you doing, do you recall what you were doing the day before . . .

AS: Absolutely, one hundred percent.

SH: How about the day before the attack, or the night before?

AS: The day before the attack was Saturday, I was ashore, having a good time.

SH: (Chuckles) What did that entail?

AS: Huh?

SH: What did that entail?

AS: Well, I can't get all into the detail of it.

SH: Okay, we won't push you too hard on that.

AS: Yeah. (Chuckles) Them days, you know, when you're young, I don't have to tell you what goes on. (Chuckles)

SH: I'm sure you don't.

AS: I used to drink a little in them days, but now I don't smoke, I don't drink. I'm a good man. (Chuckles)

SH: I'm sure you were a good man then too. When did you get back aboard?

AS: Well, I was aboard ship on December the seventh, standing outside to go down to have chow in the mess hall. And I said to the fellow in front of me, I says, "You know, it's awful funny out there with the Army. Look at all that black stuff and debris going up in the air."

He says, "Yeah, ain't the Army something awful, working on Sunday."

And then all of a sudden, about five minutes later, they come over us. And they started on Battleship Row. They hit the battleships. I watched it. We were underneath a hammerhead crane, in the yard, undergoing overhaul on all our engines, so we couldn't move. And I had no battle station that day, so I helped them with ammunition. I helped with this and I went around the ship and finally I got tired and I stood there watching all the action, which is, to me, I was pretty good. I had no battle station. So I watched the *ARIZONA* blow, all of them go.

One of our ships put a hole right through the chimney in the Navy yard. They have a tall brick chimney in them days. I don't know if it's still there. And the hole was there for many, many years, where one of our shells went right through that chimney and never even toppled it!

So, yeah, I watched the tugs, what they did, and I watched the fellows in the whaleboats that were picking up parts of the bodies, like arms and torsos, and so forth. It was a pretty bloody mess. Pretty bloody mess.

SH: What did that make you feel at the time? Did you have any . . .

AS: Yeah, I had feelings.

SH: What were they like?

AS: I had anger.

SH: Go ahead, express those. It's --- I think it's important . . .

AS: I had anger about the Japs murdering our fellows. I mean, no warning, nothing. I call it murder. Out and out murder. And we were all . . . we were ready to tell anybody that looked Oriental, in fact, in the yard, that day, anybody that looked Oriental was taken off the ships, and I don't know where they put 'em, but they weren't allowed in the yard or nothing. Anybody who . .

. I mean, I can't tell anybody whether Japanese, Chinese or what they are. But they took 'em out of the engine rooms, they didn't want them working nowhere. Then they finally, I guess, they sorted 'em out and then . . .

SH: Did that seem just perfectly normal and right to you at the time?

AS: Yes, it did.

SH: No questions?

AS: It did. No question about it.

SH: Now, fifty years have gone by since then, what are your feelings now?

AS: My feelings now are the same way against the older Japanese. The young people, no. Listen, it's a new life for them. They don't know from that. And I think the new people, the new young people over there have a different feeling on our, on life, than the older, military men did. And if it wasn't for Tojo and Ya--, Yakimoto [*Yamamoto*]?

SH: Yamamoto.

AS: There wouldn't have been no war. That's my idea. Of course, he was killed in Truk, Yamamoto. Truk Island, shot down.

SH: When you were talking about what you did the moments before the attack, you said you were standing outside to go to the mess hall . . .

AS: Topside.

SH: . . . you were on the ship?

AS: Waiting to go down the mess hall. And everybody ran for the battle stations. I had no battle stations. I went down to the mess hall and ate. There was nothing I could do. So all the fellows left their food on the table with the trays. I went over and got oranges. I just sat there eating and the men were running around shooting locks.

SH: So you knew the attack was going on and you figured . . .

AS: Yeah, I can't control nothing. So I just sat there and ate the oranges and so forth, and then wandered up and helped all them with the ammunitions. (Chuckles)

SH: Speaking of ammunition, there's a famous story about the chaplain aboard the New Orleans . . .

AS: My . . . yeah, that's right.

SH: Were you associated in any way with that?

AS: Other than he was aboard our ship, I knew the chaplain and he was running around that day hollering, "Praise the lord and pass the ammunition!"

SH: Did you actually hear him say that?

AS: No, I didn't.

SH: You didn't.

AS: Because he's running around. A lot of the other fellows heard him say it, though. And then he wrote a book about it, there's a book out. I have the book at home. And in fact, we have buttons from our reunion that says, "Praise the lord and pass the ammunition," from, you know, USS *NEW ORLEANS* and so forth. Yeah, he said it.

SH: What's your most vivid memory of that day?

AS: The most vivid memory is when we got blown in two at Guadalcanal. Well, you know, I say in two. And then when we went into dry dock in Sydney, Australia, the stench was all over the city from the decayed bodies. And then they had all the coffins ready on the docks to take the remains out. And then when we did get hit, they took all the men out of the --- one turret was left. And they had a pile of bodies up on the weld deck, which looked like, you know when you take your turkey out of the oven, how the skin is and so forth? They were all laying there like that. And that was, that's my most vivid thing in the Navy.

SH: That must be hard to leave behind.

AS: Pardon?

SH: That must be hard to . . .

AS: I'll never forget it. Never, never, never.

SH: After fifty years, when you think about Pearl Harbor? What remains important to you about that?

AS: At Pearl Harbor?

SH: Yeah.

AS: I guess it's just, you know, the memories of Pearl Harbor and the good old -- it reminded me of my youth. I go to Pearl Harbor, I'm young again. I think, well, let's go to work. (Chuckles) And I was always an active guy, so I'm gung ho on Pearl Harbor Survivors because all of us have our youth back when we get together. And every time we see each other, like 1986, we had our forty-fifth reunion here, in the same hotel. And now two years later -- no, five years later, I look at some of these fellows and myself in the mirror, I say, "Look at these old men." And it's the way it is, you know. As Walter Cronkite says it, "That's the way it is."

SH: Right. What's your most vivid memory of the day of the attack?

AS: The day, it's Battleship Row getting hit. Battleship Row getting hit, yeah. It was the *ARIZONA* got hit the worst, then the *UTAH* turned over and they had to cut the plates for those men, when she was over, they had to get the men out, so they had to cut the plates. I watched that too. And that's the most vivid thing. Everything was vivid. I mean, taking the bodies out of the water

and just depressing. In fact, I go aboard the *ARIZONA* now, the memorial and down to the Punchbowl, it's very depressing for me. People are down there and smiling and it hurts me when I see them doing that. That's a solemn place. It's not a place to be, have laughter. In fact, I was aboard the *ARIZONA*, was it two years ago, and they buried a man on there. And nobody was allowed, only survivors, and it was on PBS. Do you remember that?

SH: I don't.

AS: And they -- he was cremated and he wanted to be -- and you have to do duty during war on the *ARIZONA* to be buried on the *ARIZONA*.

SH: That's right.

AS: And they put him in a little box and the divers took him and put him in the ship and his whole family was aboard there. Beautiful ceremony.

SH: Could you actually see the activities regarding cutting people out of the *UTAH* and the *OKLAHOMA*?

AS: I could see it. I had a view of it . . .

SH: From the *NEW ORLEANS*?

AS: A distant view, but I had good eyes then. I was twenty-twenty. Now I'm sixty-sixty. But yeah, I'm watching, but I couldn't see it. I was watching the fellows cutting steel, you know. And not very good, but they were in there for a while. It wasn't right away they could get 'em out from under. They had to wait until the attack was over.

SH: After the attack was over, what did you concentrate on doing?

AS: Cleaning up, getting our engines back online so we'd go to sea. We pulled out of Pearl Harbor, the *NEW ORLEANS* pulled out of Pearl Harbor with three engines. The fourth engine, let it the way it is, and we patrolled the area for ninety days without coming in. We ran out of food. We were left with potatoes and rice. We ran out of potatoes. And then we ran out of rice and we finally had to come in for -- it was rough in them days, but it doesn't fade off.

SH: Did you --- were you part of a particular task group, with a carrier perhaps, or you were a . . .

AS: Well, we, well, carriers always had cruisers that cruised with 'em.

SH: Right, that's what I was driving at.

AS: But, not then. There was no carriers around then. But we were right there with the *YORKTOWN* and the *ENTERPRISE* [*LEXINGTON*] when she went down. We took five hundred survivors off the *LEXINGTON* when she went down. Out of water and everything, awful sight. But that was war already, war had started, you expect that. But there was, you know, some of their skin was hanging down, they were burnt so bad. It was, yeah, I was with two or three ships that went down, that we had to take survivors off of. And as Sherman said, "War is hell." I say the same thing and my name is Sherman.

SH: That's right. Let's describe just the rest of your Navy career. You were on the tug.

AS: Yeah, I put the *CURRENT* in commission, went to sea on her, with the LADY JO. And I was getting to be a short-timer. I was transferred to *MERAPI*, USS *MERAPI* [(AF-38)], which was a refrigeration ship. And I was in charge of cargo refrigeration. And I stayed on her -- wait a minute, I don't remember -- couple of years anyway, in which I ate good over there, I gained forty-three pounds which I had to lose. And then I got transferred to Hunter's Point, where they were putting ships out of commission. And I went in to report to the officer in charge. I go in and I look at him. He was an enlisted man when I was, you know, coming up too. I sat down and talked to him like we're two enlisted men. And he said to me, "Sherman, what do you want to do?"

I says, "You're in charge, tell me what to do!"

He says, "Get a jeep and ride around. Take it easy. You had enough."

And that's what I did 'til I got paid off. It was quite an experience. I mean, if I was to be in the Navy twenty years, if there's no war, they don't have no experience. It takes a war to make you appreciate what war is. And I do, I never want to see another war again, for any purpose. And anything can be negotiated, it does not have to be a war and people killed. To me, that's ignorance on a high level. There should be no wars. That's the way I feel about it. Anywhere in the world.

SH: Why don't you describe a little bit of the typical duties that you did onboard something like the *NEW ORLEANS*, working in the black gang.

AS: Well, I was in the engine room, and . . .

SH: You said you worked on machinery.

AS: Yeah, we used to take pumps apart and put 'em together and whatever needed repairing, we worked on. Then we had a machine shop -- I never worked in machine shop because that was a politician's job. (Chuckles) And but I did my job doing that, and then I went on the -- what was it? I was Chief on the tug, so I didn't have duty, I had to give people duties, but I didn't work too hard on it. But I had to see that everything was good, was running good and everything, that's what we did. We couldn't afford, you can't afford to have anything down, just sitting in the water, out there with the Japanese controlling the seas at that time.

SH: Because the engines were under repair on the *NEW ORLEANS*, you didn't have a normal battle station. What would have been your normal battle station had you . . .

AS: In the mess hall . . .

SH: . . . went under way?

AS: . . . I would have been in the mess hall, which has remote control. In case anything happens to the fellows down in the engine room, we can run or turn off valves from the mess hall, remote. But everything was done by hand in

them days. Today, you push a button, that's no work. But if you ever try to close a steam valve with seven, eight hundred pounds of super-heated steam in it, it takes three guys. It's a lot of pressure.

SH: Interesting. Have you heard any other good stories from any of your compatriots who were on the *NEW ORLEANS* at the time that you could share with us?

AS: Oh, we all had stories. We all had stories, but you tend to forget 'em because I don't remember all the stories now. I guess my cells are deteriorating a little bit. But I remember when we got hit, I knew. The ship jumped like that and came down. And I said, "Uh-oh."

I was in the mess hall, so I wanted to go topside and I started walking. I saw the water getting deeper and deeper. I said, "Ooh, I'm going the wrong way."

So I went the other way, I went topside to see what happened. I couldn't believe it. This was like midnight, or one o'clock. You couldn't see nothing. Then the next morning, we went into, we went up to Tulagi and slept there, up the river there. And we chopped down trees and we shored up the bulkheads. Before the bulkheads is where we got hit. And then we stayed in there about a week, I would imagine. And then we covered it, they chopped down the trees to cover the ship with the camouflage. And so we carried planes, two pontoon planes and they sent one of the planes up just so it wouldn't get hit. So the captain says, "What does the ship look like from the air? Can we be sighted?"

He says, "It looks like a heavy cruiser that's been camouflaged." (Chuckles)

That's what the pilot told him. But anyway, we left there and back down for 1700 miles to Sydney, Australia. What a trip. And we had two destroyers with us, the *SHAW* and the *[DENT]*, I do believe, were the two destroyers. They escorted us to Australia, Sydney, Australia.

SH: Did you have much time ashore in Australia?

AS: When we got into Australia, they put me on shore patrol. And I had a very good time over there. Australia was a good country to be. All the fighting men, the Australians were in South Africa fighting. There was no men left. (Chuckles)

SH: So I heard.

AS: Did you hear that?

SH: Yeah, I heard that. Well, I guess it's time to thank you very much for your time.

AS: It's quite all right. It's been my pleasure.

SH: I certainly enjoyed talking with you.

AS: It's been my pleasure. If I could add anything for you fellows, for anybody in the future about war, what I say is there don't have to be no war. Discuss it.

END OF INTERVIEW